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AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY

MATTHEW SMITH

Foreword

THE enjoyment of the Matthew Smith exhibition recently arranged by the Tate Gallery was so wide and so wholehearted that it is not surprising that many requests should have been made for an extension of the exhibition to galleries outside London. The one-man show at the Tate came as a timely tribute to one of England's greatest modern painters, and the Arts Council most gladly accepts the task of providing a wider public for these colourful and exciting paintings. We are extremely grateful to the Tate Gallery, to Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday, to the British Council and to the artist himself, without whose major loans the extension of the exhibition would not have been possible. We are also deeply grateful to all those owners headed by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, who have so generously agreed to extend the loan of their pictures for the showings at Manchester, Bristol and Halifax (the artist's birthplace); and to the owners who have lent additional pictures to supplement those shown at the Tate Gallery. Sir John Rothenstein has kindly allowed us to reprint his introduction to the original catalogue published by the Trustees of the Tate Gallery.

P.J.
Arts Council

Introduction

MATTHEW SMITH was born at Halifax, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, in 1879. His family—proprietors of a wire-manufacturing concern—belonged to the puritanically austere and energetic industrial middle class. He himself is shy and modest, inclined to melancholy.

It would hardly be possible to imagine a more improbable product of a region dominated by the ugliest aspects of industrialism, of such antecedents, or of such a personality, than the passionate and reckless art of Matthew Smith. But this positive and total emancipation from everything, apparently, that by heredity and environment he might have been, did not come about without a struggle which was painful and prolonged. Students of the work of Matthew Smith are surprised at the extreme slowness of the development of an artist whom time has revealed as the possessor of such rare gifts. He had reached his middle thirties before he began his life's work as a painter, and even then his beginnings were tentative. I have little doubt that this long delay was due to the acute strain imposed upon a highly sensitive temperament by the effort needed to become what he essentially was in the face of those many and powerful forces which, consciously or not, opposed his purpose.

It was not until the middle 1920's that Matthew Smith evolved in all essentials both the way of seeing and the highly individual method appropriate to its expression that he has developed consistently ever since. For all their violence, the *Fitzroy Street* nudes, illustrative of his early period, seem to express a way of seeing intellectual, constructive, and draughtsmanlike. His later paintings, mostly still-lifes and nudes—that is to say, by far the larger and most important part of his life's work—have expressed an outlook in every respect the precise opposite of this,

an attitude in which immediate feeling plays the dominant part, and in which the operations of the intellect count for little; the vision of an impassioned painter and a laborious draughtsman.

It is noteworthy that his first one-man exhibition at the Mayor Gallery in April 1926 was followed by the immediate recognition of his talents by a no less severe critic than Roger Fry in what was the first attempt at a considered estimate of his work. This appeared as an article in *The Nation* in May of the same year, and, slight though it is, it still remains relevant:

> "It is evident" (wrote Fry) "even from the first that his intention is neither to achieve dramatic expressiveness, although a certain almost melodramatic mood seems at times to result as an accidental by-product, nor to create decorative harmonies. He is clearly after some more intimate and significant interpretation of vision . . . And one sees that it is upon colour that he lays the task of situating his planes in the spatial and plastic construction. Upon colour, too, he relies to achieve the suggestions of chiaroscuro. In all this he is pushing to the furthest limits the essentially modern view of the functional as opposed to the ornamental role played by colour in pictorial design."

Two years later, in *Vogue* of 5 October 1928, his admirer and close friend, Augustus John, paid him the following significant tribute:

> "With a cataract of emotional sensibility" (he wrote), "he casts upon the canvas a pageant of grandiose and voluptuous form and sumptuous colour, which are none the less controlled by an ordered design and a thoroughly learned command of technique. This makes him one of the most brilliant and individual figures in modern English painting."

The highly personal language of painting which he evolved in the 1920's has varied extraordinarily little. In a detailed study there would be fluctuations of style to be recorded, and periods when nudes, faces, flowers, fruit or landscapes absorbed his interest. There is also an increasing emphasis upon bold and emphatic linear rhythms, but this emphasis is already pronounced by 1925. If we compare, for example, *Cyclamen* (No. 12, of about 1920), one of the earliest examples of his mature style known to me, with his *Peaches* (No. 36) of 1937, this change is evident, but it is by similarities rather than differences that we are impressed. Nor, since he found his mature style so slowly and in the face of so much difficulty, has he altered his technical procedure. Almost invariably he paints direct from his subject, only very rarely making use of preliminary studies. First he draws in his composition on a blank canvas in thin paint (well diluted with oil) so that it may easily be washed off. Deeply imbued with the classical idea that design is more important than colour, and aware that he has a natural sense of colour, but a sense of design cultivated by the sweat of his brow, he labours upon his composition until it satisfies him.

Often he spends an anguished morning or, if need be, a whole day in getting his composition right, but once he has succeeded he is able to work at great speed and the picture is soon finished. "A picture", he explained to me, "should be 'finished' from the start. In painting the gravest immorality is to try to finish what isn't well begun. But a picture that is well begun may be left off at any point. Look at Cézannes's water-colours. . . ."

Matthew Smith does not begin a picture until he sees it in his mind's eye in its completeness.

He has not the advantage of working in an age in which the practice of painting is ordered by certain generally accepted rules. That nothing of importance can be achieved by the mere observance of rules, however sound, scarcely needs saying, but by their wise observance errors may be avoided. Matthew Smith is a passionate and an instinctive painter, naturally impatient of rules and suspicious of them as tending to compromise individuality; and, as already noted, his grasp of structure fluctuates. ("His linear drawings", Paul Nash once observed, "hardly suggests the consummate painter he is"). He has shown himself a colour-intoxicated man. "He does not often hit the nail on the head", wrote an anonymous critic, "but you should just see the wood all around". This observation was made many years ago. Today it calls for an emendation, for the number of nails hit on the head, and with resounding blows, is by now considerable. Matthew Smith's paintings, bold and even reckless hymns of praise to the colour and warmth and ripeness in the world give him an assured place among the major English painters of the age.

JOHN ROTHENSTEIN.

Catalogue

(All the pictures are in oil.)

1 SELF-PORTRAIT 1909
28½ in. by 19½ in.
Lent by the artist.

2 COPY AFTER 'MADAME RIVIERE' BY INGRES . . . . . c. 1910-11
46 in. by 35 in.
Lent by Mrs. Matthew Smith.

3 THE PLASTER CAST 1913
19 in. by 38 in.
Lent by Mrs. Harold Rothery.

4 DULCIE. 1915
32½ in. by 30 in.
Lent by Southampton Art Gallery.

5 FITZROY STREET No. 2 1916
40 in. by 30 in.
Lent by the British Council.

6 THE LITTLE SEAMSTRESS 1919
36 in. by 25½ in.
Lent by Leeds City Art Gallery.

7 SMALL CORNISH LANDSCAPE . . 1920
11½ in. by 13¾ in.
Lent by Sir Colin Anderson, F.R.S.A.

8 CORNISH LANDSCAPE 1920
21 in. by 26 in.
Lent by Mrs. Edward Hulton.

9 CORNISH CHURCH 1920
21 in. by 23½ in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery.

10 A WINDING ROAD, CORNISH LANDSCAPE 1920
20½ in. by 24½ in.
Lent by the British Council.

11 CORNISH LANDSCAPE WITH MONKEY PUZZLE 1920
24½ in. by 20½ in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday.

12 CYCLAMEN . . . . . c. 1920
24 in. by 20 in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery.

13 THE BLACK DRESS 1921
30 in. by 25 in.
Lent by the Mayor Gallery.

14 THE ORPHAN 1924
13 in. by 21¾ in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday.

15 MODEL TURNING 1924
26 in. by 32 in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery.

16 COULEUR DE ROSE 1924
21¼ in. by 28¾ in.
Lent by the British Council.

17 WOMAN WITH A FAN 1924-25
60 in. by 39½ in.
Lent by Jacob Epstein, Esq.

18 MODEL A LA ROSE 1925
35¾ in. by 25½ in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday.

19 THE FALLING MODEL 1925
36½ in. by 49½ in.
Lent by the Mayor Gallery.

20 FEMME EN NEGLIGEE . . . . . c. 1926
36 in. by 28 in.
Lent by the artist.

21 ROSES . . . . . c. 1926
32 in. by 21 in.
Lent by Mrs. Thelma Cazalet-Keir.

22 FADING ROSES 1927
26 in. by 22 in.
Lent by M. V. B. Hill, Esq.

23 FEMME EN CHEMISE . . . . . c. 1927
36 in. by 26 in.
Lent by Brighton Art Gallery.

24 PEONIES . . . . . c. 1928
30 in. by 25 in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery.

25 FLOWERS AND FRUIT 1928
29½ in. by 24½ in.
Arts Council Collection.

26 THE TWO SISTERS . . . . . c. 1930
20 in. by 27 in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday.

27 NUDE WITH A PEARL NECKLACE . 1931
29 in. by 36½ in.
Lent by the artist.

28 MONT SAINTE-VICTOIRE. 1932
22 in. by 30 in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday.

29 MODEL RECLINING 1933
20½ in. by 25 in.
Lent by Manchester City Art Gallery.

30 LANDSCAPE NEAR CAGNES . . . 1935
15 in. by 18 in.
Lent by Dr. Henry Roland.

31 GREY DAY, CAGNES 1935
12 in. by 9 in.
Lent by E. M. Behrens, Esq.

32 NUDE WITH ROSES . . . . . c. 1935
36 in. by 29 in.
Lent by Beau Levy, Esq.

33 LANDSCAPE, EVENING, CAGNES . c. 1935
12½ in. by 28½ in.
Lent by the British Council.

34 LANDSCAPE, SOUTH OF FRANCE . 1936
14½ in. by 21½ in.
Lent by W. G. Weaver, Esq.

35 LANDSCAPE NEAR AIX . . . . . c. 1936
16 in. by 19 in.
Lent by Major E. O. Kay.

36 PEACHES 1937
23½ in. by 29 in.
Lent by the Tate Gallery.

37 WHITE DAHLIA IN A BLUE JUG . . 1937
31⅛ in. by 25½ in.
Lent by the British Council.

38 LANDSCAPE, AIX-EN-PROVENCE . 1937
21 in. by 32 in.
Lent by the British Council.

39 STILL LIFE: JUGS AND APPLES . . 1938
21½ in. by 25½ in.
Lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother.

40 STILL LIFE WITH CLAY FIGURE IV . 1938-1940
51 in. by 38 in.
Lent by Southampton Art Gallery.

41 ELIZABETH RAYNHAM 1941
24 in. by 20 in.
Lent by Major E. O. Kay.

42 STILL LIFE AT TICKERAGE III . . . 1943
14 in. by 18 in.
Lent by Dudley Tooth, Esq.

43 AUGUSTUS JOHN, O.M., R.A., IN HIS STUDIO 1944
40 in. by 30 in.
Lent by Jocelyn Walker, Esq.

44 SITTING NUDE, OCHRE, CRIMSON AND TURQUOISE 1944
40 in. by 30 in.
Lent by Mrs. Edward Hulton.

45 STILL LIFE AT FRYERN 1944
20 in by 24 in.
Lent by David Gibbs, Esq.

46 STILL LIFE WITH GOTHIC FIGURE . 1945
20 in. by 24 in.
Lent by Dudley Tooth, Esq.

47 FRUIT AND LEAVES 1947
15 in. by 24 in.
Lent by Mrs. D. W. Tooth.

48 STILL LIFE: JUGS AND COFFEE-POT 1950
32 in. by 26 in.
Lent by the artist.

49 PEACHES IN A STRIPED DISH . . 1950
20 in. by 24 in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Halliday.

50 QUINCES AND POMEGRANATES . . 1952
25 in. by 30 in.
Lent by the artist.

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